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ABSTRACT

Members of local boards of education should expect to spend around twenty hours a month on normal board activities, including about nine hours in meetings, four hours preparing for meetings, four hours in reflective thinking, and three hours dealing directly with schools and school patrons. Among topics that must be addressed carefully and regularly at meetings are the board's basic commitments or goals, its operations, its relations with the superintendent, the state of the facilities, relations with the faculty and staff, fiscal matters, the instructional program, noninstructional services, relations with the community, and student affairs. Finally, board members must assess their own performances and their interrelationships with other board members objectively in order to develop their own abilities and improve board effectiveness. This document presents these aspects of board members' activities and obligations in chart form. (PGD)

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SOME EXPECTATIONS

FOR

NEW SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

by

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SOME EXPECTATIONS FOR NEW SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

People are prompted to run for election or to seek appointment to local boards of education for a variety of reasons. Customarily, the candidate's intent is couched in verbiage declaring an interest in improving the quality of education. Less frequently, but still in noticeable numbers, are candidates who state that they will reduce the cost of the school's operation. A much smaller group is composed of people who pledge that, if elected, they will work to alter the personnel roster--that is, they want someone fired. It is pure speculation to try to determine if there is any relationship between the articulated reasons and the real reasons because real reasons for candidacy are sometimes closely guarded secrets that are never publicly and explicitly revealed.

There are a few people who find real joys in contested elections. Most do not. Even election winners often find elections to be traumatic experiences. For most board members, looking backward at contested elections is the joy. That is, it is a good thing to have in the past, to know that, for whatever reasons, voters cast enough votes to prompt the election commissioner to send a certificate of election, and to know that it is an event that will not come around again, soon. For most school board members, the joy of an election is in the past tense!

After election comes obligation and opportunity. This paper is an attempt to graphically display some of those opportunities which come after the oath of office and stark recognition of substantial obligation. The paper is devoted to three aspects of the obligation:

(1) time commitments

(2) board business topics

(3) relationships between board members

Surveying characteristic events and activities of boards of education, it is possible to assign some time estimates to each event. Although those events may vary from board to board and from month to month, they have been developed out of nearly ten years of boardmanship and from extended conversations with board members from many other school districts. It is fair to present them as events and activities in which board members must engage, and which, averaged over several months of activity, do provide an accurate estimate of how time will be spent in board activity. Beginning board members should not expect average time commitments to prevail every month, but experiences indicate that wide variations should prompt a new member to be alert. That is, if there seems to be hardly anything that takes a board member's time beyond a few perfunctory tasks, the board may be badly underinvolved in the operation of the schools. Or, the converse may be true. Display #1, "Time Commitment Estimates," provides a ready reference point for a new board member to use as a benchmark, to ask questions, and make judgments. Grave imbalances in time commitment need correction.

The business topics are comprehensively representative--an eleven item list--of what must be attended, if board performance is to be high, if the board is going to positively impact the schools for which they are responsible. Some board attention must be devoted, every month, to selected topics. To address them only occasionally is to run the risk of low quality performance. For example, it is apparent that fiscal matters must be attended every month because bills must be paid, and infrequent, unsystematic attention to money matters is an open invitation to all sorts of hazards. It may not be

quite so apparent that school-community relations needs monthly attention, but a short, sober reflection on the question is sufficient to realize that a public school district, facing a population base that is less and less directly connected to it through the medium of students, must carefully and regularly portray its programs to all the patrons of the school district. Institutions that are forgotten are soon unsupported. Display #2, "Business Topics..." is an experience based indicator of substantive operational topics, with the topic on board interrelationships isolated for extended treatment.

Third, and especially for new board members, the question of performing as one person on the board is covered in Display #3, "Performance and Interrelationships." Should new board members take stands on controversial topics, or lay back and let experienced hands make the decisions? The lay back position was surely not a part of the candidate's campaign rhetoric. Although board members should not feign ideas when they really have none, intelligent questions are always in order. Questions are the genius of the board, for they lead to discussion, prompt ideas, and are generally necessary for the board's function. New members are in the perfect position to ask questions, a natural way to actively enter the workings of the board. Performance includes many other aspects of attempting to smoothly relate to each other member of the board. Disagreements from discussion are inevitable. The display calls up for attention ten such performance opportunities, put into a checklist that allows a board member to do a little self-assessment. If the board member, honestly taking the self-assessment, has any performance categories ranked as four or five, areas for improvement as an individual performing on a board became obvious.

Finally, this entire description of school board membership has been brief--but it is pointed, direct, and experientially based. From such a

candid discussion, all but the few most sophisticated beginning board members should find some assistance toward growth in the competencies that, if exercised, will make board membership personally enjoyable and a positive gain for the governed school district.

Display #1

Board Membership

Time Commitment Estimates

Events or Activities	Time Needed
1. Board Meetings	
2 per month, 3 hours each	6 hours
2. Committee Meetings	
2 per month, 1½ hours each	3 hours
3. Board Meeting Preparation	
Examining agenda materials	4 hours
4. Reflective Thinking	
What programs need attention	
What questions need to be asked	4 hours
5. School Visits	
1 per month	2 hours
6. Solving Patron Problems	
2 per month, 30 minutes each	1 hour
7. Conventions	
Workshops	
Inter-district Visits	
	20 hours per month

Business Topics

for a

Board of Education Meeting

Topics	Frequency		
	Every Month	Occasionally	At least once each year
Basic commitments (goals) of the board			X
Board operations			X
Board-superintendent relations		X	
Facilities	X		
Faculty/Staff Personnel	X		
Employee Relations		X	
Fiscal matters	X		
Instructional program	X		
Non-instructional services		X	
School-community relations	X		
Student affairs		X	
Board member interrelationships			X

Board Member

Performance and Interrelationships

Category	Ranking				
	Always				Seldom or Never
	1	2	3	4	5
1. Accepts obligations of board policy					
2. Prepares adequately for each meeting					
3. Takes position on controversial subjects					
4. Seeks solutions that are best for whole district					
5. Refrains from individual commitment					
6. Treats other positions with respect					
7. Asks for superintendent's recommendation after discussion					
8. Supports majority decision, after voting					
9. Accepts restrictions of open meetings laws					
10. Stays in limits of agenda					